DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 383 271 HE 028 384

AUTHOR White, Martin
TITLE Results of Mid-Tier Experience: Observation to Engagement.
PUB DATE 21 Apr 95
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (San Francisco, CA, April 21, 1995).
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *College School Cooperation; *College Students; *Educational Attitudes; Elementary Secondary Education; Higher Education; Junior High Schools; Middle Schools; Program Descriptions; *Student Journals; Student Teachers; *Student Teaching; Teacher Attitudes; *Writing Skills

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the evolution of a collaborative school-university program in which Central Michigan University college students worked with intermediate students from a local school district to help improve the pupils' writing skills. It describes the evolution of the program from a pull-out activity for seventh- and eighth-graders having difficulty with their writing to an in-class program in which the college students interacted with the entire class and often taught complete lessons. The program then expanded to the district's high school and a local alternative school. The college students involved in the program were required to work closely with the classroom teachers and keep journals of their teaching experiences. A review of journal entries found that the writing of the seventh- and eighth-graders had a significant impact on the way the college students finally viewed teaching and learning. (MDM)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

Results of Mid-Tier Experience:

Observation To Engagement

Martin White

ED 383 271

HE028384

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☑ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Martin White

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Results of Mid-Tier Experience:

Observation To Engagement

Martin White

Overview

The crucial component for effective school/university partnerships is interaction. The more participants, the more likely learning and growth will occur. The mid-tier program in which Central Michigan University students work with intermediate students from the Mt. Pleasant School District allows for layers of interaction and engagement. College professors, graduate assistants, college students, public school teachers and students all work with each other in different combinations of teaching and learning.

During my two years with the mid-tier program, the structure of our college students' experience has changed considerably. Two years ago, the mid-tier was essentially a pull-out program. Seventh and eight grade students who were having difficulty with their writing would meet with a college student one-on-one in a room separated from the classrooms. There two or three pairs of student writer/student tutor would work under the direction of a graduate assistant.

HE028 284

This arrangement had some benefits. It allowed for more intense, individual interaction. An expert, the college student, could devote more attention to the text of an intermediate student. Because of the isolated circumstances, the intermediate student was more likely to respond to questions and engage in a discussion of the writing.

The problems, it seems to me, outweighed the benefits. Having to leave class to work on writing gave a punitive impression. The students having difficulty with writing were, after all, the ones leaving, and they became even more identifiable to the rest of the class and themselves. The pull-out students also lost interaction with their teacher and their peers. This interaction might include other students reading their texts which could in turn serve as concrete, accessible models for the students having difficulty. And in terms of models, the college students had no one on which to base their actions. They had been given some instruction in conferencing in their classes, but had not seen actual seventh and eighth graders discussing their texts with adults. In the words of Donald Graves, they were not involved in writing in "game" situations (1984, 183).

Last year the intermediate school teachers decided they would like the college students to remain in the classroom, observing instruction, writing when the class wrote, conferencing with individual students, responding in peer groups, and on occasion, teaching lessons to the entire class. These five activities (as well as conferencing with teachers outside the classroom) became the criteria for the mid-tier experience. My students had to engage in at least five of the six activities over the course of a semester. Teaching the entire class became the option because the opportunity to do so depended on the college student's desire and maturity as well as the intermediate teacher's willingness. Usually only four to eight of thirty or more college students

taught a lesson to the entire class.

Within this new model, the responsibility of the graduate assistants shifted from one of overseeing instruction to facilitating visitation and maintaining records. This lessening of responsibility was one drawback to the change in structure, but within a year the teachers, the graduate assistants and I decided to initiate a literary magazine for the intermediate school and the graduate assistants began to organize and advise the student editorial board. We not only created a more active function for the graduate assistants, but also an additional, more demanding audience for student writing.

This year the partnership has additional dimensions, and consequently, the experience of my college students is more varied. One of the intermediate teachers was reassigned to the high school, and because of her positive experience the year before, invited college students to work with her there. Also, one of my students collaborated with a teacher in the local alternative school and opened up the opportunity to work there as well. These sites, and the added opportunities the literary magazine provides, create a variety of age groups and contexts for the college students to work with students and teachers.

In addition to maintaining records of the dates and times of their visits, my students keep process journals in which they reflect on their own experiences, on teacher practices, and on student writing in the schools. These journals provide the most direct evidence of their attempts to link theory and practice over

the course of a semester in the classroom. They offer a record of the reconstruction of a personally-held model for teaching, one in which students struggle to balance the ideal and the real. They also recount my students' journey from observation to engagement.

Experiences

Entry into a classroom is always difficult, even for the most gregarious students. As their journals illustrate, the initial visits of three of my students were quite different experiences. The first student seems concerned that the classroom environment is too static:

> Well, I haven't gotten to interact with students as much as I had counted on. I know we're not supposed to turn in a whole semester of "Sitting Observing"s, but it doesn't seem as if I've much choice in third hour. I think Ms. X spends a lot more time talking to the whole class than she intends to.

In this situation, the student matches the classroom activity against her own developing expectations. She contrasts this class setting against an ideal she holds, the student-centered classroom. The initial disappointment of viewing a real classroom is a reaction many students shared. They expect the experience to be tailored to their agenda rather than the moment in ongoing instruction created by the shifts and motion of a classroom where teacher and students are trying to construct meaning. The college student needs to de-center and that requires prolonged interaction in the classroom.

In a second instance, a student connects class reaction to her own earlier experience as a student. Rather than judging the atmosphere, she tries to make personal sense of it:

> I went to my first observation in Ms. Y's class this morning. It was amusing to watch the students and the way they behave. I remembered how I was in junior high and thought, "Did I really act this way?" I felt pretty comfortable in general.

Even in this positive response, there is a necessary egocentrism through which the student makes personal sense of the classroom environment.

Where the second student conpares experiences, a third student immediately begins to make connections with her methods courses while observing early in the semester:

> Class started with a chapter of <u>The Giver</u>. I haven't figured out when she reads and when she doesn't. The students seem to respond well. I mean, they listen without sleeping or writing notes or talking. When they do talk, it's about the story. What an exciting discovery! . . .[makes reference to a professor's point about fluency in reading.] Anyway, these students are held by the magic of this book, paying total attention to the teacher. It's a great way to get them to read, I think.

Even at the observation level of involvement, students begin to examine classroom behavior in ways that make sense for them. They contrast, question and reaffirm these experiences in light of

their own expectations, and in so doing, begin to formulate a more realistic view of the teaching/learning act. As they interact with students, the revision of this idealized model continues to change, through frustration, through negative and positive validation, through surprise.

As he conferences with students for the first time, a fourth college student encounters some disappointment:

> In both classes there are just one or two students who seem really receptive to me, and the others couldn't care less if I'm around or not. This was quite a blow to my self-esteem at first, because I distinctly remember one of the teachers telling me at the outset that, "The students love having you here."

The excitement he felt about teaching wanes because, rather than immediate gratification, he faces a not-surprising hesitancy on the part of seventh graders to share their work with a stranger. Again, the student's response is intensely personal and initially disappointing.

Sometimes the disillusionment continues and the students shift their assessment of it from an individual case to a category. Rather than explain problems within a particular class or in terms of the college student approach to teaching, those students believe the problems lie in a category which they can avoid in their own careers. One student's journal entry provides a representative sample of this decision:

> Over the past several weeks, I have been observing

> and participating in Ms. X's 7th grade classrooms. The first conclusion that I've come to is that I don't want to teach 7th grade. The primary problem is that of classroom management. I realize that these are hormone infested 13 year olds, but the problem is keeping kids busy. The kids are just finishing up a project where they pick an author, read a book about that author, then write a report on the author and the book. Given that the kids have different ability levels, the project will take some kids longer than others. The problem in the classroom is keeping kids busy that are finishing up projects early. I would think that the best way to do this is to give them something else to do. How do you go about this without it seeming like the extra work is punishment?

Implicit in this journal response is the student's own attitude toward reading and writing. The question should reflect back upon his own modeling behaviors in reading and writing and what he has learned from that modeling. The student does not ask whether reading and writing hold intrinsical motivational, whether to use Czikszentmihalyi term, students engage in a state of "flow" while reading or writing. Instead, he projects the difficulty as one of classroom managagement and believes the problem lies in the grade level of the students.

Although this student had concerns after weeks of working in the classrooms, most students accept the shortcomings of any real

lesson as exceptions to the learning environments. Over time, positive validation occurs far more frequently than negative validation. Some students find success and fulfillment interacting with young adolescents.

> The experience I've gained through my mid-tier has made me rethink what grade level I'd like to teach. I'm really starting to enjoy working with the middle-aged [sic] children. It just feels as if there's more creative freedom in the middle classroom. The activities I've observed were interesting for myself and the students. I have seen the problems that come along with the age group so I'm not changing my mind with my eyes closed. I honestly enjoy working with the children at the middle school. The challenge motivates me. The decision is a shock to me because I've always thought of this age group as strung out, especially when I recall my middle school days.

Essentially the same experience creates markedly different responses in these two college students. Although the second student expresses "shock" at the discovery that she enjoys 7th grade, her response was not that unpredictable. Each interprets the experience in ways that make personal sense. For the first student the 7th grade classroom is anarchic; for the second it is creative. The difference arises from their the underlying assumptions which constitute their understanding of how and when learning takes place. In this sense, they are both prisoners of their models, unable to look at the information they receive in

different ways. The mid-tier experience, however, gives them essential data against which to express and subsequently examine their beliefs.

Because dealing with intermediate students and their teachers is such a complex enterprise, the mid-tier leaves many of my students with more questions than answers. The questions, however, begin to focus their personal investigation into teaching and learning in a much more realistic context. Where the individuals, because of their complexity, create confusion which surfaces in the journals, the products those individuals create allow for a much clearer appreciation.

Student Texts

The aspect of the mid-tier which causes real surprise was not the behavior of the seventh and eighth graders, but their writing. Perhaps because it stood on its own merits, a stable artifact outside the context of an interactive classroom, that writing had a telling effect on the college students, and journal after journal reported the same surprise which resulted from student texts:

> Today I listened to one student's writing. Boy, was it good. It's amazing how the imagination works at that age. I remember when I was at that age I could write too. Too bad the imagination seems to leave if it's not cultivated. His story was riveting and yet he thought it was bad.

In this one-on-one interaction, ground in a seventh grader's text, the college student engages in a number of issues that are central

to student writing: authority, audience, voice and the need for outside validation of a writer's worth. For most of my college students, as well as for all the intermediate teachers, the accomplishments of student writers finally outweigh the day-to-day problems in the classroom.

Even without the writers present, students see the power of their work and begin to reconsider their views of teaching and learning:

> I had my first experience working on the literary magazine yesterday. I was in the library for about an hour and a half and unfortunately did not work with a single student. Instead, what I did was transfer several of their poems from paper onto the computer. I have to admit that I was quite impressed by the poems. They were all quite good and showed that the students put for effort and really thought about their poems. I had originally thought that the poems would all be pretty much the same when it came to structure, i.e. rhyming every other line, etc. . . but every poem showed diversity. No two poems share a common theme or structure. Choosing their own topics in the classroom has some purpose after all.

Conclusions

In most instances, the actual writing of seventh and eighth graders has the greatest impact on the way the college students finally view teaching and learning. The surprise at their talent and effort leads students to reassess the classroom environments

they have observed. The noise level and the different pacing take on new meanings for them. Student writing by itself would not have accomplished that shift of awareness. They begin to engage in what Emig calls "non-magical thinking," that teachers teach and learners learn, but not the same thing (1983, 135). College students have to experience the actual environments; they have to move from the ideal to the real world before they are able to shape a meaningful model of teaching and learning which they can apply in their student teaching and subsequent career. My students accomplish that by moving from the classroom to the student to the student's writing, discovering the result of classroom atmosphere and strategies. Toward the end of their mid-tier experience, we begin to investigate the interplay of teaching and writing in real classrooms. Students reverse their initial direction, reconstructing the teaching decisions and examining their relationship to effective learning.

Without the school/university partnership mid-tier experience, most of my students would retain their idealized view of education. They would lack an important understanding to prepare for student teaching. I have read a quotation attributed to Nathan Hale : "The perfect is the enemy of the good." The mid-tier partnership allows college students to see the imperfect, but good teaching and learning that occurs in intermediate classrooms every day.

Mid-tier programs are in their infancy. Pre and post testing and statistical models may not provide the best information about

the experiences our studentst encounter. As we begin to examine the effects of mid-tier programs, I believe it is important to look at the ways in which students construct that experience in their own language. Is the movement from an idealistic to a realistic stance typical of students? Are there specific indicators of engagement in their journals, in their language? After intitial exposure to classrooms, do the college students begin to look less at the teachers and more at the school students? Do college students begin to construct their own models of learning? How do formal theories inform these models of learning? These questions require a concern for text that runs deeper than statistical analyses usually allow, yet these are the questions that need to be answered to determine the efficacy of any preservice experience.

Works Cited

Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly. The Evolving Self. New York: Cambridge University Press. 1993.

Emig, Janet. The Web of Meaning. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann Press. 1983.

Graves, Donald. Writing: Teachers & Children at Work. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann Press. 1984.